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ABSTRACT

This study investigated initial placements, current placements, and stability of placements for 2,643 graduates of special education preschool programs for children (ages 3-4 years) with developmental disabilities from 74 New Mexico school districts during the first 5 years of such programming (1986-87 to 1990-91). Major findings were that 10% of the graduates were initially placed in regular education, 41% in regular education with support, and 42% in self-contained classrooms. Seven percent of the graduates had either moved and/or were in other placements (e.g., private schools). Placements then stabilized at approximately 11% in regular education, 35% in regular education with support, 45% in self-contained classrooms, and 7% moved and/or other placements. Data indicate that placements in integrated settings are increasing each year, while placements in self-contained settings are decreasing. Six recommendations are made based upon analysis of the data, and a five-step action plan is presented to bring about needed changes and measure the impact of change. (10 references) (Author/JDD)

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Post-Preschool Placement of Young Students with Developmental Disabilities Exiting Public Special Education Preschool Programs

A Final Report submitted to the State Department of Education, Special Education Unit

(1990 Sec. 619 Preschool Award)

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Abstract

This study investigated initial placements, current placements and stability of placements for 2,643 graduates of special education preschool programs for three- and four-year olds with developmental disabilities from 74 New Mexico school districts. Subjects graduated in five waves or "panels" from 1986-87 (the first year of special education preschool programming in New Mexico) through 1990-91. Major findings were that 10% of the graduates were initially placed in regular education, 41% in regular education with support (A- and B-level) and 42% in self-contained classrooms (C- and D-level). Seven percent of the graduates had either moved and/or were in other (e.g., private school) placements. Currently, placements have stablized at approximately 11% in regular education, 35% in regular education with support, 45% in self-contained classrooms, and 7% moved and/or other placements. Current data for each panel indicate that placements in integrated settings are increasing each year while placements in self-contained settings are decreasing.

Post-Preschool Placement of Young Students with Developmental Disabilities Exiting Public Special Education Preschool Programs

In recent years, outcome evaluation of programs for young children with developmental disabilities has addressed several divergent variables. These variables include: child change (Bricker & Sheehan, 1981); teacher performance (Lazzari & Bruder, 1988); family interaction (Rosenberg & Robinson, 1988) and cost-effectiveness (Wood, 1981).

Another variable, and one that is infrequently used is post-preschool placement (Edgar, McNulty, Gaetz, & Maddox, 1984). As Bricker (1989) has stated,

> Conducting follow-up or longitudinal research is an arduous task reflected by the paucity of studies contained in the literature. . . . Methodological and design problems. . .create barriers to the conduct of longitudinal research, and most likely these problems are compounded by the passage of time during which a complex array of variables may change and become realigned. Nonetheless, there continues to be a significant need for longitudinal studies on organically impaired populations (p. 80).

The purpose of the research reported here was to investigate (a) initial placements, (b) current placements and (c) stability of placements for graduates of public special education preschool programs. Results for these three major areas of investigation are reported below.

Method

Subjects and Setting

New Mexico subjects included all 2643 children who graduated from special education preschool programs in 74 districts during 1986-1987, 1987-1988, 1988-1989, 1989-90, and 1990-91 (the first five years of such programming). All 19 independent school districts and 10 regional center cooperatives were requested to participate. Nine of 10 (90%) regional center cooperatives participated and 17 out of 19 (89%) independent school districts agreed to participate, for a total of 84% district participation (see Figures 1 and 2).

Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here

All subjects met eligibility criteria for students with developmental disabilities in New Mexico and were between the ages of three and five. Children were considered graduates when they were placed out of preschool or reached the age of five by September 1st of a given school year. Table 1 contains demographic information on subjects. The 1991 findings continue to reflect the fact that males outnumber females by 2 to 1. Sixty-six percent (66.4%) of the total preschool graduates are male and 33.6% are female. These same proportions are consistent across all handicap-

ping conditions.

Ethnicity of preschool graduates parallels ethnic distributions of the general population. Anglos are the largest group, with 46% of the total graduate population. Hispanics follow closely, with 42%. Native Americans comprise 8%, Blacks 2%, Asians 1%, and 1% are categorized as "other."

Procedures

A data collector from each independent school district or regional center cooperative recorded data on a protocol adapted from the Early Childhood Follow Along Study protocol used in a previous longitudinal study (Edgar, Heggelund & Fischer, 1988) conducted in the state of Washington. Data collectors were school personnel who had been or were presently involved with the district's special education program. Workshops were conducted throughout the state in order to assure consistent data collection procedures. Data collectors received instruction in use of the form and were instructed to call the project office if any clarification was needed during data collection.

For each graduate, the data collector recorded demographic data, current handicapping condition, initial educational placement and current educational placement. Initial and current placement data were recorded for 1986-

1987, 1987-1988, 1988-1989, 1989-90, and 1990-91 graduates. Due to the large number of graduates categorized as communication disordered, specific placements for these students were examined according to speech or language disorder, and level of placement.

Results

Initial Placements

Initial placements for New Mexico graduates are described in Table 2. Data are presented for 2643 graduates from preschool programs in 74 of 88 (84%) participating school districts. Two hundred sixty-four (10%) of the graduates were placed in regular classroom settings, 1082 (41%) in regular education with support (A or B Level) and 1120 (42%) in self-contained classrooms (C or D Level). An additional 177 (7%) students moved or were in other non-specified placements.

Table 2 indicates that of initial placements after preschool, 5% of those graduates were classified as students with mild mental disabilities, 60% were classified as students with mild disabilities, (BD, CD, LD), and 35% were students with other disabilities (e.g., physically impaired). Thus, despite the fact that two-thirds were considered mildly handicapped upon leaving preschool, only one-half of the total population of graduates was initially

placed in regular education or regular education with support.

Insert Table 2 about here

Current Placements

As indicated in Figure 3, 11% of New Mexico preschool graduates are currently in regular classroom settings with no special education services. 40% are in regular education classrooms with some special education support (e.g., a resource room) and 49% are in self-contained classrooms. Further breakdowns of data for current placements are described in Figure 4 and Table 3.

Insert Figures 3 and 4 about here

Table 3 indicates current placements of New Mexico graduates by handicapping condition. As shown, the largest category of graduates currently placed in special education are children with communication disorders (CD). D-level programs were the most frequent placements for graduates. The most infrequent placement for graduates was C-level (special education classroom with some integration).

Insert Table 3 about here

Of graduates with mild handicaps, 59% of children with behavior disorders, 35% of children with communication disorders, and 46% of children with learning disabilities are currently placed in self-contained classrooms. Students with communication disorders make up 81% of A-level programs, 75% of B-level programs, 46% of C-level programs, and 33% of D-level programs. Table 3 indicates that the majority of all preschool graduates, with the exception of those with learning disabilities and communication disorders, are currently placed in self-contained classrooms.

Of the 1991 graduates, 61.5% had mild handicaps (Learning Disabled, Behavior Disordered, and Communication Disordered). This is an increase from 55% of the 1990 graduates. The number of graduates with mild mental handicaps did not significantly change in 1991. The percentage of graduates with other handicapping conditions decreased slightly, continuing a trend. These percentage changes can be largely attributed to the yearly increase in students with communication disorders, from 33% in 1987 to 57% in 1991.

Because of the large representation of the CD category in the DD preschool graduates, this group was examined more closely. Of those students, 31% were receiving only speech

services, while 69% had a language disorder instead of or in addition to a speech disorder. Of all CD students, 25% are in A-level programs, 20% in B-level programs, 11% in C-level, and 35% in D-level programs. Anglos comprised 49% of all CD students, while 42% are Hispanic. This highly correlates with the population distribution, suggesting that students were not being classified as CD due to lack of exposure to English.

The other two mild handicapping conditions, (BD and LD) were over-represented among anglos and under-represented among Hispanics. Native Americans were over-represented among those students who are classified as multiply impaired.

The number of students classified as communication disordered decreased from 57% of those students now in kindergarten to 33% of those students now in 4th grade. The number of students classified as learning disabled has gradually increased from 3% of those now in kindergarten to 12% of those graduates now in 4th grade.

Stability of Placements

Stability of initial placements has been identified as an important variable in the literature (Edgar et al., 1988; Guralnick & Bennett, 1987). As Guralnick & Bennett (1987) described it:

> Although movement from setting to setting can occur at any point in the child's life, experience suggests that the expectations of teachers and parents are likely to be highly correlated with the initial placement decision....Failure to intervene early to ensure the least restrictive nature of this initial placement will surely have life long consequences (p. 18).

When stability of placement was examined, it was determined that 90% of New Mexico graduates remained in the same type of placement. In other words, most students initially placed in regular education remained in regular education. Most students placed in special education remained in special education, but not necessarily at the same level.

Summary and Recommendations

This study examined initial placements, current placements and stability of placements for graduates of public special education preschool programs in New Mexico. Major findings for initial placements were that 10% graduated to regular classroom settings; 41% to regular education with support (A & B levels), 42% to self-contained classrooms and 7% to other placements. For current placements, 11% are in regular classroom settings with no support, 35% percent are in regular education classrooms with some support and 45% are in self-contained classrooms.

Nine percent had either moved or were in other non-specified placements.

Results of this study appear consistent with the Washington follow-up studies conducted by Edgar, et al. (1988). In Washington, 14% of the graduates were initially placed in regular education, 22% in regular education with some support and 64% in self-contained settings. Taken together, placements appeared to be very stable in the states of Washington and New Mexico with stability ranging from 75% to 100%. In addition, results for the last year (1990-91) of the New Mexico study were consistent with results from previous years.

When current placements are examined by individual panels from 1987 to 1991, placement changes are apparent. Placements in regular education have remained at the same level. Resource placements (A and B level) have increased from 26% to 45%, while self contained placements have decreased from 56% to 38%. Data from previous years of this study have placed stability of initial placements at 90%. This suggests that fewer initial placements will be made in self-contained classrooms, while more students will be into integrated and mainstreamed classrooms.

Insert Figure 5 about here

The following five recommendations are made based upon analysis of the data from this preschool panel longitudinal study:

1. Over the past decade, New Mexico legislators have been successfully lobbied to support preschool for children with developmental disabilities on the grounds these programs would significantly lower the cost of education because children would no longer need special education when they reached school-age. The findings in this study indicate that over a five-year period, prevention of special education occurred in only a small minority (10%) of the cases. This finding is very similar to Edgar, et al's. (1988) earlier panel longitudinal study where prevention occurred 14% of the time over a five-year period. The question thus arises, should preschool programs for young disabled children be discontinued? The current researchers say "no." In our opinion, other more important reasons exist than reducing costs of education. These reasons include "learning specific skills, interacting with other children and providing emotional and physical support to parents (Stile, Hudson, Ames, Kelley, LeCrone, & Edgar 1992, p.12)."

2. Analysis of stability data in this study indicate that "once in special education -- always in special education" is a truism (e.g., children with severe handicaps initially placed in C-and D-level programs in New Mexico remained there for at least a three-year period after graduation 86% of the time). In view of these data, we suggest that if any doubt exists about the most appropriate placement option, place the child in regular education or regular education with support.

3. Post-preschool placement data for the five-year study indicated the lowest incidence (8%) of initial placements were in C-level programs. Since C-level is a less-restrictive option than D-level, we recommend a careful follow-up investigation of this phenonomen.

4. The most frequent (63%) placement option used in New Mexico's preschools is D-level self-contained. This may account for the large number of similar initial placements for preschool graduates. In view of this situation, the project staff recommends that the Unit strongly encourage LEAs to integrate their preschool settings to the extent possible in an effort to increase the number of initial regular education and regular education with support (A&B) placements for preschool graduates.

5. About fifty-percent of the preschool students studied over the five-year period were classified as communication disordered (CD). Sixty-nine percent of the graduates had a language disorder. Given this high proportion, research and development (R&D) efforts directed toward primary grade language curricula might enable more New Mexico children with communication disorders to quickly move to less-restrictive placements during the primary years.

6. Given resistance and negative feelings expressed by other agencies, NMSU did not attempt to compete for additional discretionary funding to continue the full-scale longitudinal study for at least another year. However, it is recommended that the Special Education Unit consider a small-scale project to follow-along a sample of previous subjects at least through mid-school (e.g., some of the original subjects are already in 5th grade). This could be done very economically by randomly selecting one small-, one medium- and one large-sized district. Such an effort could shed additional light upon the efficacy of New Mexico's preschool programs for children with developmental disabilities.

The following five-step action plan is recommended to the New Mexico Special Education Unit to bring about needed changes

and measure impact of change:

1. Disseminate findings and recommendations of this study through such vehicles as SPECIALNET and UAP Newsletter;

2. Encourage administrators (e.g., coordinators of preschool programs) to implement the recommendations. This could be done, for example, by inviting LEA representatives to attend special meetings at such conferences as State CEC and Magic Years;

3. Provide financial incentives to LEAs/RCCs to implement the recommendations and analyze results (e.g., fund the CD R&D project in one urban and one rural district);

4. Continue the longitudinal study (recommendation number six) via a cooperative agreement between the Unit and the New Mexico State UAP office where the original research was conducted; and

5. Disseminate the results of the discretionary projects on a continuing basis via SEA publications and professional conferences.

The New Mexico State UAP office takes this opportunity to thank the New Mexico Special Education Unit for its continued support in the Longitudinal study. It has been only one of a

small handful of similar studies conducted nationally and has resulted in a much clearer picture of the outcomes of early intervention for preschool children with developmental disabilities. A manuscript comparing results of the studies in New Mexico and Washington has been completed and submitted to Topics in Early Childhood Special Education. A second article is nearly completed which will be submitted to Exceptionalities. This manuscript will describe the results of the dissertation research on correlates of follow-up placements conducted by Dr. Brenda Hudson. Dr. Hudson coordinated the longitudinal study at NMSU for two years and is now the Coordinator of the ECSE program at Emporia State. In addition to these two manuscripts, results of the study have been disseminated at professional conferences in New Mexico, Wisconsin, New York, Georgia, Arizona, Illinois, Oklahoma, Minnesota and Maryland. The Special Education Unit was identified as the source of funding in all cases. A copy of this document will be submitted to the ERIC system.

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Table 1. Gender and Ethnicity of New Mexico Preschool Graduates

Gender	Percentage
Male	66%
Female	34%

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Ethnicity	Percentage
Caucasian	47
Black	2
Hispanic	41
Asian	1
Native American	8

Table 2. Initial Placement by Preschool Handicap for Each

Category	Graduating Panel 1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	Total	
Children with Mild Mental Handicaps							
Reg	0	0	1	2	0	3	(2%)
Reg S (A & B Levels)	2	7	4	2	2	17	(12%)
Sp (C&D)	22	24	28	27	14	115	(80%)
Other	2	1	2	3	0	8	(6%)
Total	26	32	35	34	16	142	(5%)
Children with Mild Handicaps (BD, CD, LD)							
Reg	19	28	40	62	54	203	(13%)
Reg S (A & B Levels)	89	126	191	230	259	895	(57%)
Sp (C&D)	51	60	89	83	99	382	(24%)
Other	13	12	21	25	28	99	(6%)
Total	172	226	341	400	440	1579	(60%)
Children with Other Handicaps							
Reg	11	8	8	16	15	58	(6%)
Reg S (A & B Levels)	22	31	38	36	43	170	(18%)
Sp	91	116	133	139	144	623	(68%)
Other	9	9	12	25	15	70	(8%)
Total	133	164	191	216	217	921	(35%)
Total	331	422	567	650	673	2643	

Note. Reg = Regular education placement; Reg S = Regular education with support; Sp = Special education placement.

Table 3. Current Placements by handicapping Conditions

	Level of Special Education Services					Total
	A Level	B Level	C Level	D Level	Reg 1	
Behaviorally Disordered	8	6	6	18	3	41
Communication Disordered	352	243	83	252	31	961
Gifted	1	5	0	2	0	8
Hearing Impaired	6	3	3	28	3	43
Learning Disabled	9	31	26	11	3	80
Mentally Handicapped Mild	14	5	24	99	6	148
Mentally Handicapped Moderate	0	1	4	60	0	65
Mentally Handicapped Severe/Profound	0	0	0	27	0	27
Multiply Impaired	3	8	13	152	2	178
Physically Impaired	35	18	19	89	2	163
Visually Impaired	2	4	2	24	1	33
Not Handicapped	3	1	0	0	162	166
TOTAL	433	325	180	762	213	1915

New Mexico School Districts

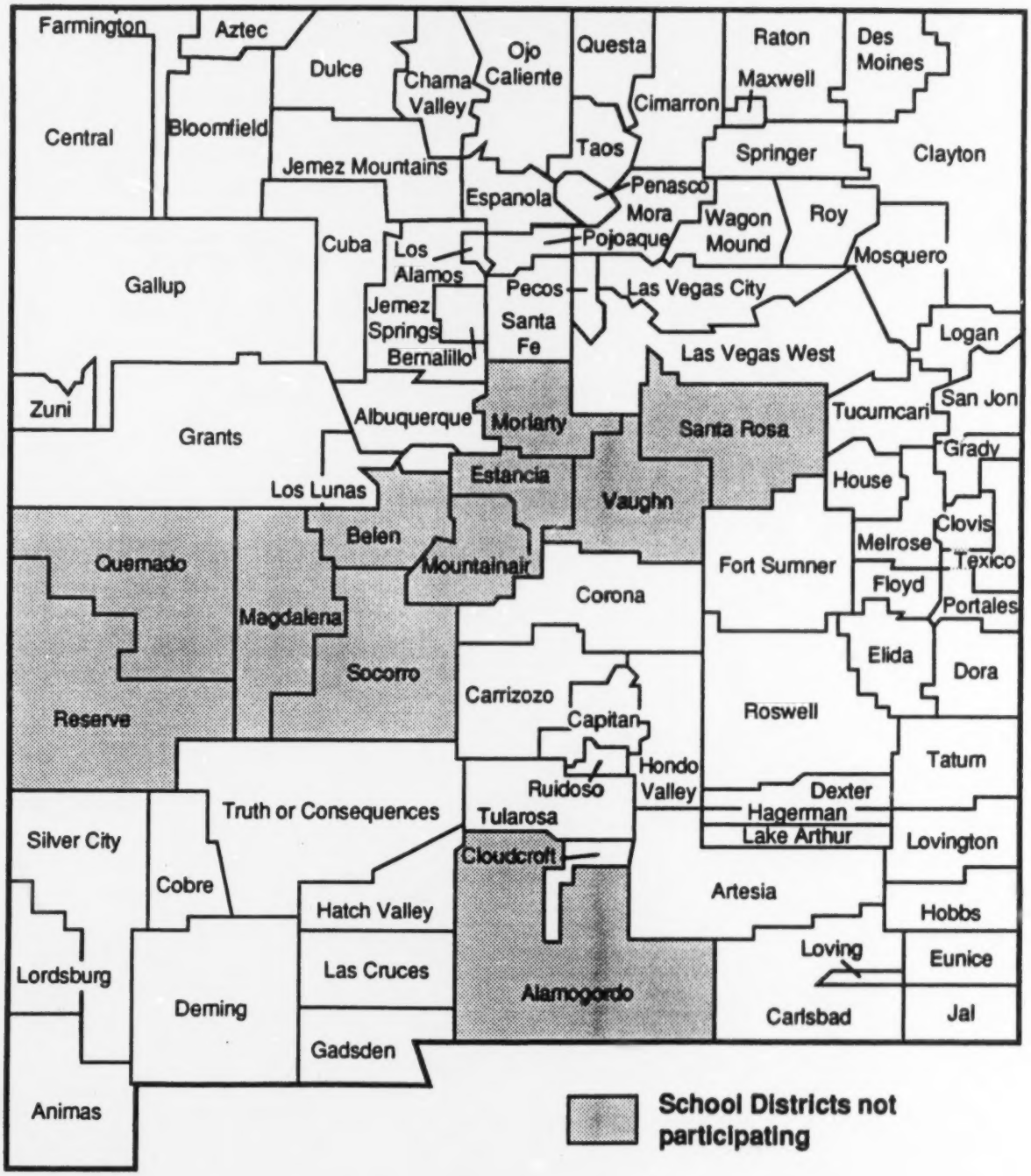

Figure 1

New Mexico DD Preschool Graduates by Year*

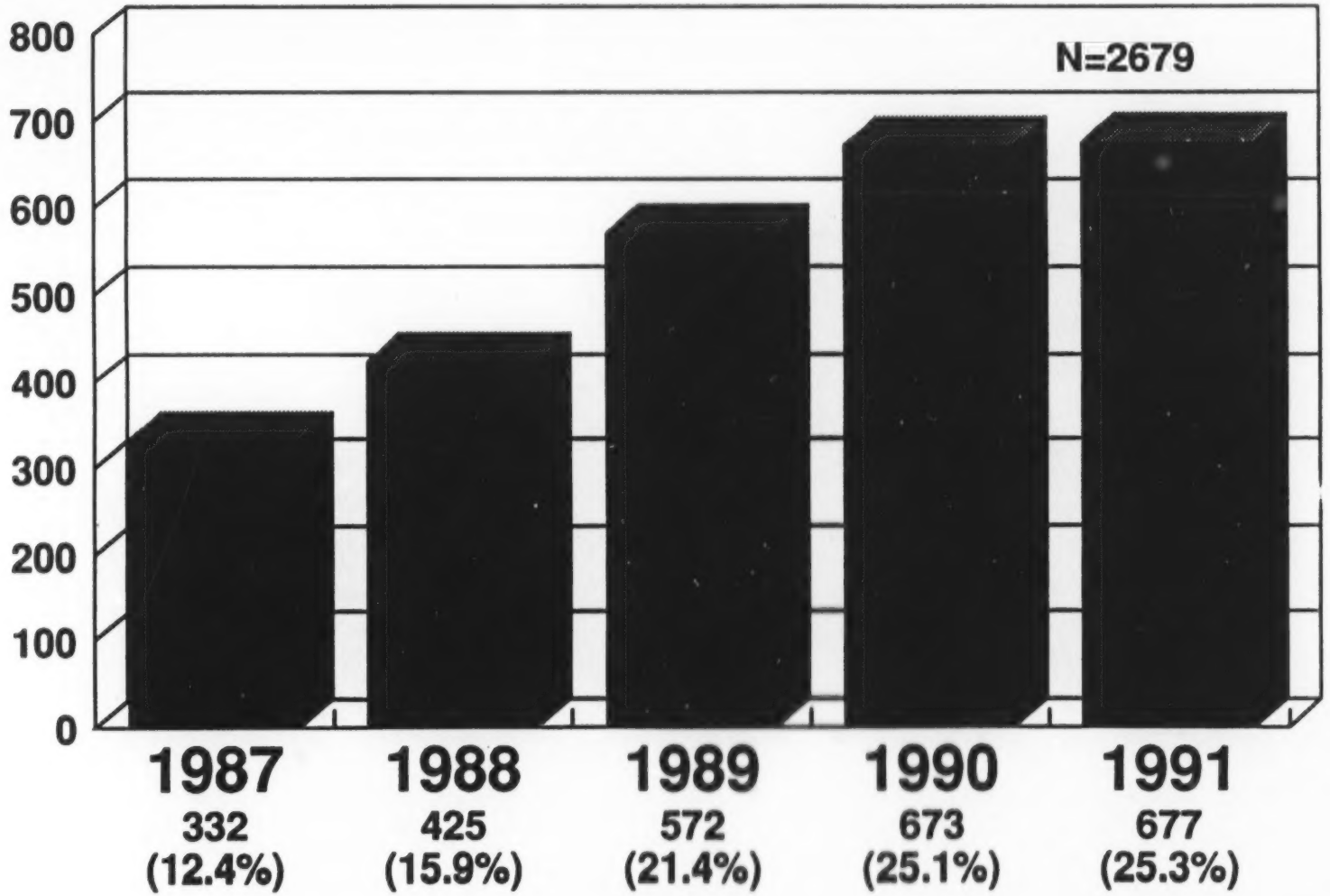

Figure 2

Current Placements for 1991

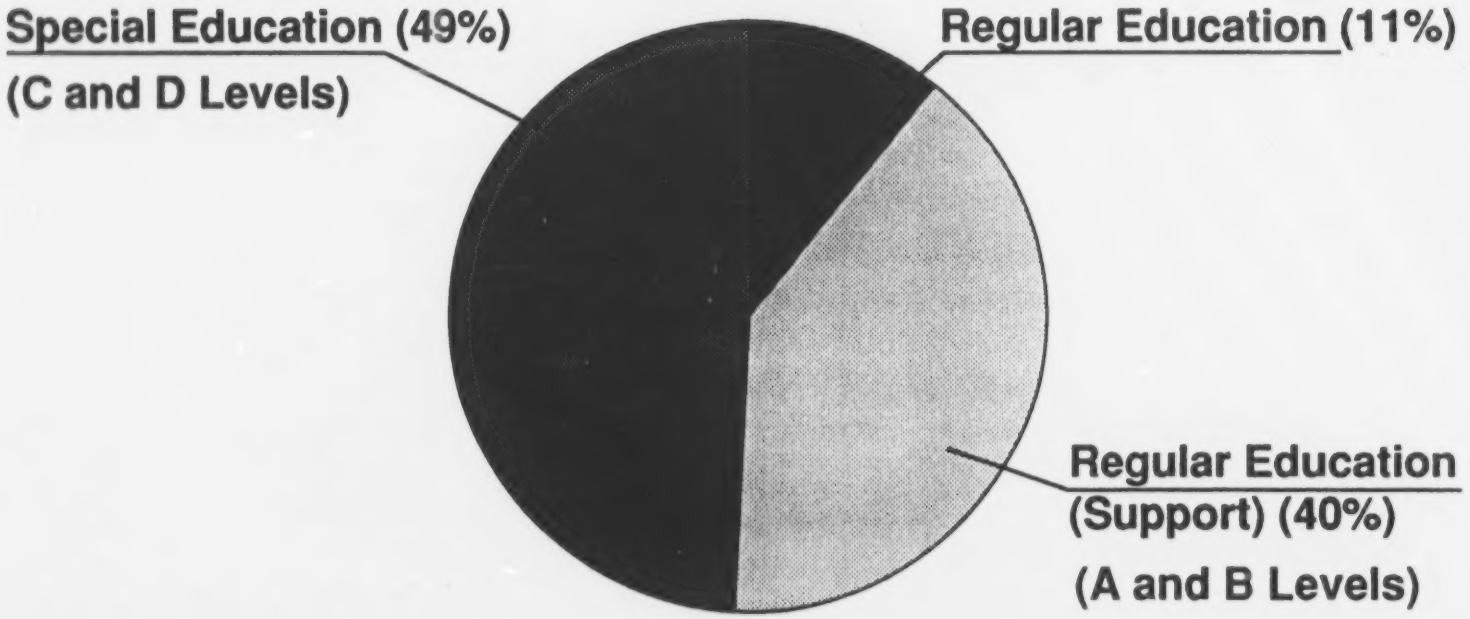

Figure 3

Current Placements for 1991

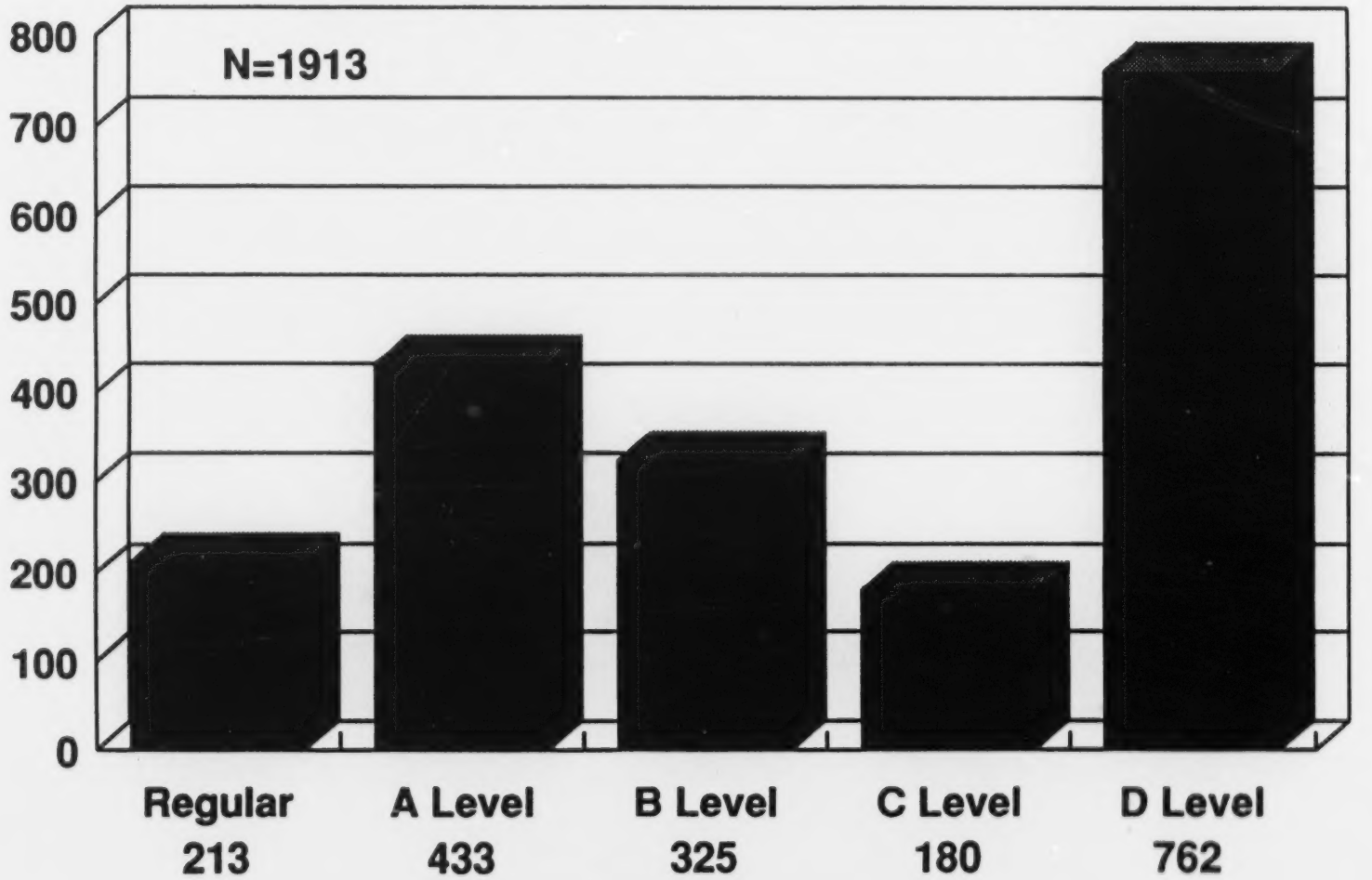

Figure 4

Initial Placements by Panel

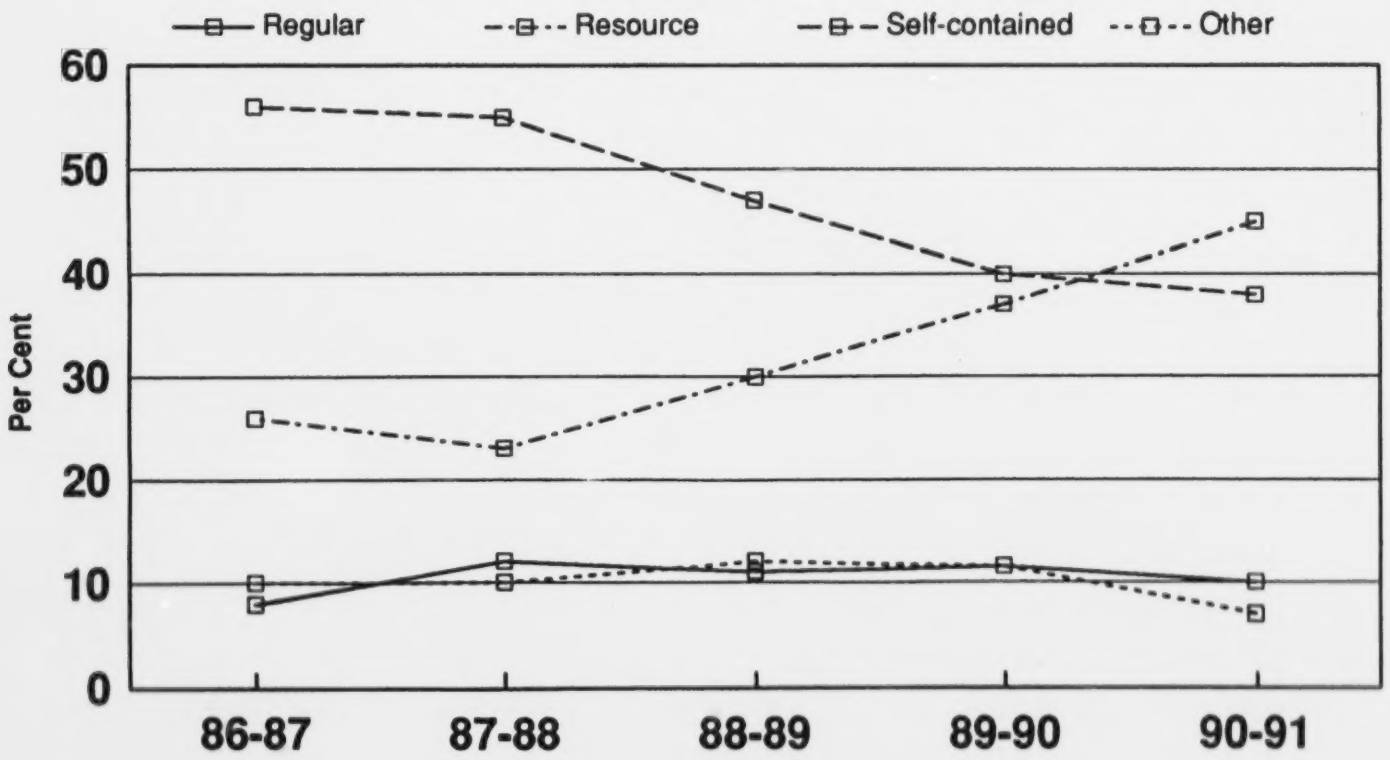

Figure 5